

Area Office focuses on constructing, mentoring

By Brenda L. Beasley

Building with the end in mind is how the Kandahar Area Office views the projects they're constructing in Afghanistan Engineer District's Regional Command South. They're not only working toward completing projects for Afghans to use and maintain, they're teaching a trade to enable Afghans to stand on their own.

Through projects to build infrastructure, military housing on KAF, Afghan National Army facilities, Afghan National Police facilities and roads, the KAO is hoping the Afghans walk away with the experience and knowledge they can use to get a good job building some where else.

"We're mentoring as much as we're constructing," said Charles "Chuck" R. Wilburn, the acting area engineer of KAO and the resident engineer of the KAF Resident Office. "We want them to be able to have a craft when they're through with building a wall or pouring concrete."



Construction Representative Michael Conner (center) and Engineer Technician Trudy Templeton (right) discuss construction progress with Quality Control Manager Afzali Nassir (left).

Providing quality, responsive engineering and construction services to a variety of customers in Afghanistan is one of AED's missions under the Strategic Reconstruction Program, according to Corps officials. Through this effort, the Corps performs a crucial role in the international efforts to facilitate establishing a secure and stable environment in Afghanistan while promoting reconstruction and infrastructure development.

KAO achieves this mission while facing a multitude of daily challenges that include the lack of quality construction materials and skilled craftsmen, the language barriers, a high employee turn over rate, and building in remote hard-to-access locations.

Together with Resident Offices in Lashkar Gah, Tirin Kowt, Qalat, Kandahar proper, and Kandahar Airfield, in Afghanistan, KAO completed \$380 million in military construction projects last fiscal year and is expecting to complete \$980 million this year, said Wilburn.

Getting good quality materials is an obstacle in building ANA and ANP sites. "We make a conscious effort to use local products," said Wilburn. When materials aren't available, the Afghans improvise using anything from a stick to a tree trunk, which is how they have done construction for generations and generations.

At some locations the



An Afghan worker assembles scaffolding for construction of a two-story barracks at a Border Patrol site.

workers work under duress. Their construction supplies are stolen or destroyed by the Taliban and other criminals. Some of this occurs because the supplies are valuable, while some of it is done to inhibit the reconstruction effort. To combat this, contractors have had to become ingenious on how they get supplies to the job site. Sometimes they use a lot of

security, sometimes they use less to be more inconspicuous. They change up their routes and some deliveries are even clandestine. "Materials show up by car, truck, bus, and sometimes even by tractor trailer or a flat-bed truck," said Wilburn.

Although new to Afghanistan, Wilburn's not new to construction projects. He served as the resident

engineer of the Sebring Resident Office for the Gulf Coast Area Office under the Jacksonville District for about 14 years before transferring to Mobile District's Red Stone Arsenal in Huntsville, Ala., as a project engineer.

Ensuring the contractor is adequate is part of being a quality assurance inspector. In the remote provinces, contractors are further removed from technology and education. Some of the locations are so remote that the KAO has to rely more on the onsite craftsmen when they're unable to get there. When the contractor has a limited number of craftsmen, it's more difficult to get the standard construction quality in an underdeveloped nation. "Most of the time you'll see very sophisticated construction," said Wilburn, "but not at the remote sites."

In traveling to remote project sites, KAO relies heavily on NATO forces to get them there and back safely. Wilburn recalls his first experience on a long mission that involved traveling in the dark to a construction site that was outside the wire after being in Afghanistan for only two months. "We left about 4 a.m. to go to the site. It was still dark out. There were no power lines and no street lights. To get there, we had to join up with a Danish convoy. They would shoot off flares just to see as we traveled. We drove in the middle of the road and the other motorists would pull off to the side. On the way there, we noticed



Afghan workers construct one of the buildings at the Joint Regional Afghanistan National Security Forces Compound.

a burned-out sport utility vehicle on the side of the road, but we didn't stop. Once at the site, we checked on the project, but we stayed so long, that it was dark when we left. When we got back to where the burned-out SUV was, the Danish convoy pulled over and stopped. We listened to them talking on the radio, but since none of us new Danish we didn't know what they were saying or why they had stopped. Finally, after about 15 minutes, they got back in their vehicle and we proceeded back to the base. Although we were never fearful, we did start to feel a little uneasy sitting in the middle of the road for that long."

Coordinating the timing of construction activities with Coalition Partners is a very important aspect of KAO's mission. "Using the theater model of 'Shape, Clear, Hold, Build', we work very closely with Coalition Maneuver



Concentration is necessary as Afghan workers smooth the grout between building cinders.

forces to synchronize our contracts to follow the 'Hold' stage," said KAO Officer in Charge Maj. K. Weedon Gallagher. "This reduces our 'flash to bang' time so Afghans can see tangible results very shortly following combat operations."

Safety practices are



Teamwork helps productivity as two Afghan workers pour concrete for spacers that are needed for rebar placement.

an important aspect of construction inspection oversight. Situational awareness is a must when working in land mine areas. “Virtually every project site has to be demined before we can begin construction,” said Wilburn.

Local nationals are used to making and building things the way they have for generations. KAO stays vigilant to ensure OSHA standards are being followed. They check to make sure the scaffolding is properly built and that the workers are

wearing hardhats and safety shoes. They check the work site for fall protection and ensure the contractor has the right cables to lift the weight they’re lifting. “Although many Afghan contractors don’t know current construction practices, they want to learn,” said Trudy R. Templeton, an engineering technician for KAO.

The Afghan people are steadfast, said Templeton. They work toward completing the project even during Kandahar’s extremely hot temperatures. She ensures

that the contractor is building according to the plans and specifications and reviews the pay estimates with the contractor’s project manager for completed work.

Unlike the United States, families living in tribal areas typically spend their entire lives living together in one small community. With the new roads being built, Afghans will be able to travel easier which may create a change in culture. “Instead of taking days and days to travel by cart and donkey,” said Templeton, “they’ll be able to use more vehicles.”

Deployed from the Kansas City District, Templeton’s been working at the Kandahar Airfield for almost two years.

Kandahar Airfield is located 10 miles southeast of Kandahar City in Afghanistan and was built by the United States in the 1960s, under the U.S. Agency for International Development program.

It was rebuilt in 2007, and is used for both military and civilian flights. “We’re on a NATO base and have a lot of amenities offered to us,” she said. “We’re very fortunate to be deployed here.”

Seeing a project from start to finish is a reward in itself. Being able to show the Afghan workers U.S. construction standards and us learning their way is an interesting combination. “Because our way might not necessarily be the best way, there’s give and take,” said Wilburn. “You have to know what they’re good at and not take them out of their element.” 📷